IMPRIMIS

"The Rebirth of Democracy in the Former Soviet Empire"

by Elena Bonner
Founder, Sakharov Foundation

Preview: *Since her husband Andrei Sakharov's death in 1989, Dr Elena Bonner has become in her own right one of the foremost leaders* ***in*** *the democratic movement in Russia. In this essay, based on her lecture presented at Hillsdale College's 20th annual Ludwig von Mises Lectures in the Spring of 1993, Dr. Bonner calls for a new Russian constitution.*

The April Referendum

In recent months Russia has been going through one more critical stage of development in the difficult transition to democracy, a stage that is at once cause for optimism and pessimism. This April, key members of the Congress of People's Deputies did their utmost to ruin the national referendum that was in essence meant to determine the fate of the policies and presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Specifically, they attempted to rig the questions on the referendum ballot so as to ensure a vote of no confidence. But their efforts failed spectacularly, and once again the Russian people unequivocally demonstrated their loyalty to-President Yeltsin and to the cause of democracy.

So much for the good news. The serious problem of deteriorating relations between the Congress of People's Deputies and the president remains. The current deputies were elected *in* March 1990, when the Communist Party was still in power. Some "experts" have claimed that they were elected by fair and democratic means, but this is not true. As a result, the overwhelming majority are old Party functionaries and members of the *nomenklatura*. Sixty-two percent–i.e., 639 out of a total of 1,033 deputies–consistently oppose democratic reforms. Just before the referendum, 618 actually voted to impeach Yeltsin. Only 38 percent 394 deputies–consistently support the president and the policies of reform. Each group spends most of its time battling to win over wavering deputies. In this environment, it is highly unlikely that the Congress of People's Deputies can achieve any substantive reform.

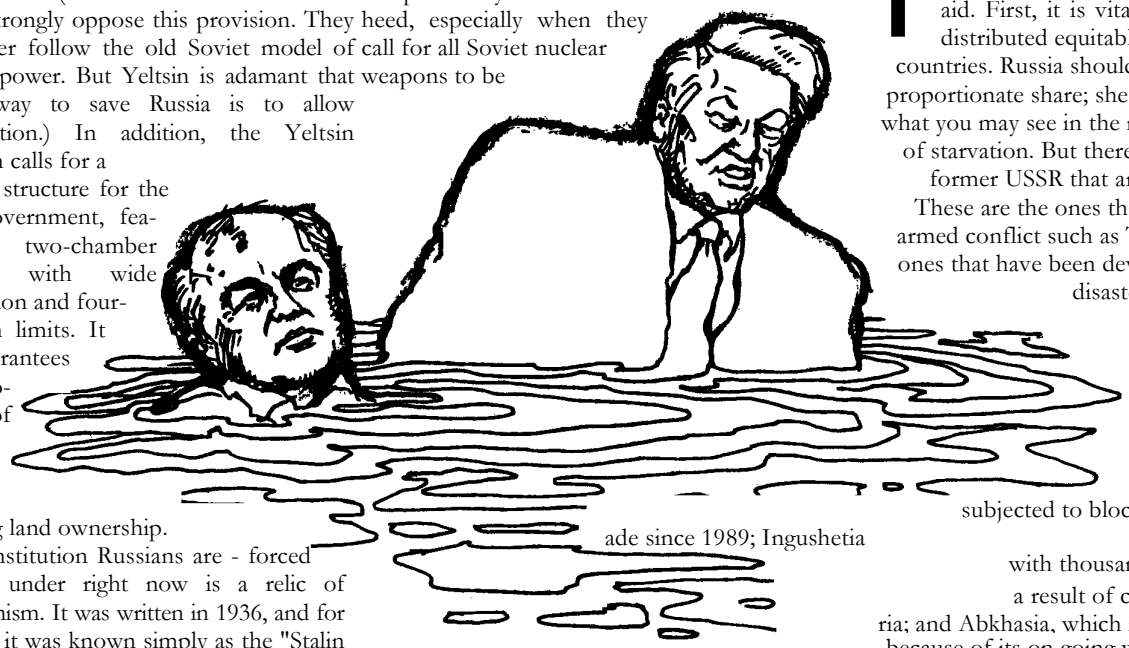
An Anticonstitutional Crisis

Russia desperately needs–and needs soon if more violence is to be averted–a new written constitution. With-out one, we will see more of what happened in the streets of Moscow on May 1,
when deputies upset by the outcome of the referendum incited massive street violence in Moscow–the likes of which hasn't been seen since 1917 when the Bolsheviks used the same tactics in trying to come to power. In this case, tragically, over 500 hundred people were-injured and one person was killed.

Democratic, pro-constitutional forces squandered their last political victory in August 1991 after the failed coup attempt when it would have been feasible to painlessly adopt a new constitution and to change the membership of the Congress. They must not squander their victory now. Two or three months ago, you could not have drummed up much interest in a new constitution, but now, after the successful referendum, it is on everyone's mind. On April 29, the Yeltsin govern-

ment unveiled its proposed version of a new constitution. It seems to be the most democratic and the most adequate response yet to the needs of the nation. In my opinion, it still gives too much power to the president, but this can be addressed.

The first and primary chapter in the Yeltsin constitution guarantees the civil rights of all citizens. The second chapter outlines a federalist system in which autonomous republics, regions, provinces and local governments retain a large degree of independence. (Anti-reform elements in Congress strongly oppose this provision. They would rather follow the old Soviet model of centralized power. But Yeltsin is adamant that the only way to save Russia is to allow decentralization.) In addition, the Yeltsin constitution calls for a whole new structure for the national government, featuring a two-chamber parliament with wide representation and four-year term limits. It also guarantees the inviolability of private property rights, including land ownership.



The constitution Russians are - forced to live under right now is a relic of communism. It was written in 1936, and for decades it was known simply as the "Stalin Constitution." Then in 1978, when it was revised to further tighten the grip of the Communist Party, it was dubbed the "Brezhnev Constitution." During the last year and a half, 342 amendments to the "Brezhnev Constitution" have been passed by the Congress of People's Deputies, but this has only succeeded in making matters more confusing and contradictory and has forestalled any genuine improvement. Instead of serving as the supreme law of the land, the constitution is still the instrument of self-serving politicians. Some observers, therefore, have characterized this stage of Russia's development as a constitutional crisis, but in reality it has been an anticonstitutional crisis.

The Nuclear Arms Issue

There is another crisis looming on the horizon for Russia. In an interview a few days before the April 25 referendum, Ruslan Khasbulatov, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Congress of People's Deputies, was asked by the Western press about the ratification of the START agreements. He replied categorically that the Congress would not ratify any arms treaty until Andrei Kozyrev, minister of foreign affairs and one of Yeltsin's staunchest supporters, was fired or forced to resign. In other words, arms reduction has become a hostage that can be ransomed only for a certain political price. The Congress is filled with deputies like Khasbulatov who think and behave this way. They display a deadly combination of infantilism, belligerence and irresponsibility that Western leaders should heed, especially when they call for all Soviet nuclear weapons to be transferred to Russia. Until Russia becomes a stable democratic state with leaders who pledge to abide by the law rather than their own whims, no weapons should be transferred. Just imagine for a moment that the people who were behind the May 1 violence in Moscow suddenly had total political power backed up by total control of the only nuclear arsenal in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Russia and the CIS

Some say that the real hope for peace and progress lies in once again unit- ' g all the former Soviet republics under the banner of one government. But their ethnic roots, histories and cultures are far too different. Nothing short of World War III would ever unite them again. But the new Russian constitution could be an enormous benefit for all CIS countries. Leonid Kravchuk, president of the Ukraine, acknowledged as much when he endorsed Yeltsin just before the April referendum. The fact that he chose to make his support public marks a watershed in the post-communist era, for up until now CIS solidarity has been a sham. This unprecedented overture has signaled that a new era of cooperation between CIS countries has begun.

Western Aid

There is one more issue that I want to mention, the issue of Western aid. First, it is vital that this aid be distributed equitably to all CIS countries. Russia should not receive a disproportionate share; she is not, contrary to what you may see in the news, on the verge of starvation. But there are regions in the former USSR that are hunger-stricken. These are the ones that are caught up in armed conflict such as Tadgikistan; or the ones that have been devastated by natural disaster like Kyrgyzstan, which suffered an earthquake that destroyed the last harvest. There is also Armenia, which has been subjected to blockade since 1989; Ingushetia with thousands of homeless as a result of conflict with Osseria; and Abkhasia, which is in need of aid because of its on going war with Georgia.

Second, the Jackson Amendment of the 1970s should be revived. No U.S. aid should be given to countries where human rights are routinely violated. Other nations should follow this example when formulating their own aid policies. Unless aid is linked directly to human rights, the West has no leverage to effect change—it is only subsidizing injustice and tyranny.

Third, Western aid should not be the most important or the only method of helping. Money, even when it amounts to billions of dollars, cannot overcome every problem. Sometimes it can even make problems worse. If the West really wishes to help, it should support efforts in CIS countries to establish democratic constitutions that will guarantee human rights, a stable currency, private property, foreign investments, free trade, and the rule of law. Western creditors should also consider postponing debt payments, especially since the debts in question were incurred by Yeltsin's communist predecessors.

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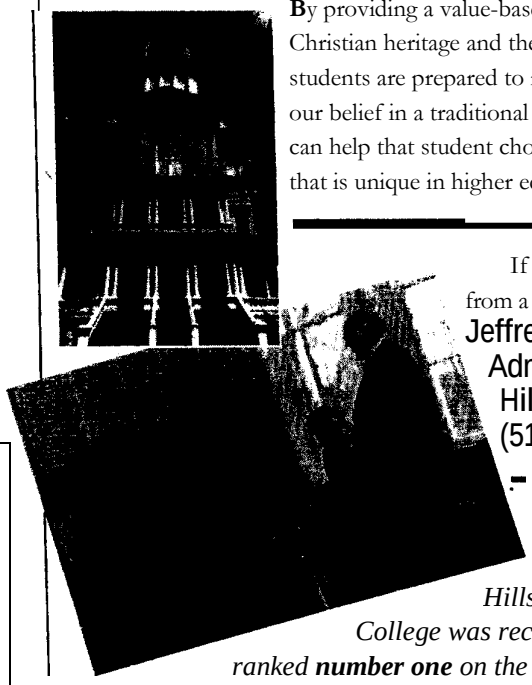
The Generation That Is the Future

said at the outset that this stage in Russia's transition to democracy is cause for optimism and pessimism. Ultimately, I think optimism will triumph. Why am I so sure? It is not just because of the huge turnout for the April 1993 referendum, even though that turnout was phenomenal by any standards. It is mainly because I have seen *who* turned out. The biggest pro-Yeltsin, pro-reform group was comprised of Russian men and women between 20 and 35 years old. These young people are better educated and better trained than ever before and they have something that is totally new in Russian society: a global mentality. Moreover, they outnumber those who oppose reform—the retired, the veterans of war, of labor and of the Communist Party. These young people *are* Russia's future. They will not give up on freedom and we should not give up on them.

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